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UNCLAS ATHENS 000534

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SUBJECT: EDUCATION BILL PASSES AMID VIOLENT PROTESTS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The education bill passed by the Greek parliament on March 8 is far from the sweeping constitutional reform the Karamanlis government once sought. Rather than providing for a systematic overhaul, it tinkers with the existing state-funded university system. The bill makes no provision for private educational institutions, which is the domain of the separate Article XVI debate. The law provoked violent protests, and more demonstrations are scheduled today. Nevertheless, with the bill now law, the Karamanlis government is determined to hold firm -- and there is no sign that the protests have lessened Karamanlis' electoral lead over opposition PASOK. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On March 8, with protesters literally outside the Parliament, the Karamanlis government ratified a controversial education bill by a vote of 164 to 117. The bill, which attempts to reconcile diverse views on higher education, is an effort to bring order to the traditionally messy administration of universities. Its provisions include:

- fixed semester length of 13 weeks (including any closure for strikes and demonstrations);
- merit-based promotion of teaching staff;
- limitations on the length of time students would be allowed to extend their course of study (to eliminate "permanent" students from the rosters);
- mandatory drafting of University by-laws;
- obligatory financial and development plans to be issued by universities every 4 years, for state review in order to obtain government subsidies;
- election of university rectors by universal student suffrage.

¶3. (SBU) Unlike the government's earlier parliamentary effort to amend the Constitution -- which would have introduced non-state controlled, not-for-profit private education in Greece -- this bill is limited to refining the existing system. It touches only obliquely on one of the most controversial issues: university "asylum." The new law will allow for "asylum" to be lifted by a majority vote of the university's Academic Council, in the presence of a public prosecutor -- placing a cumbersome burden on authorities seeking access.

¶4. (SBU) While far from radical, these measures, like earlier debate over changing the constitution, provoked the worst day of public violence in weeks of student demonstrations. Hooded anarchists armed with fire bombs, planks, stones, and steel balls attached themselves to the student protest rally, surprising anti-riot police. For the first time, they also moved against the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (just in front of Parliament), painting insults on a Presidential Guard shack, setting it ablaze, and forcing the honor guard to retreat (which they had reportedly never done before, including during the Axis occupation of Greece). Police released tear gas, rounded up some forty individuals, and

arrested 11. Student organizers and academic staff representatives denounced the police for allegedly "indiscriminately attacking" their "peaceful" protest, and demanded the resignation of the Minister of Public Order, Vyron Polydoras.

¶5. (SBU) While the violent protests against the education bill made headlines, a few peaceful protests specifically targeted educational institutions with American affiliations, which were not the subject of the legislation. Between 50 and 100 protesters organized by the communist party, KKE, arrived at the campuses of each of the Hellenic-American University, New York College, and Deree College. By all reports the protests were conscientiously peaceful. Protesters hung banners with language denouncing private education, blocked entrance to the buildings, and voluntarily disengaged before noon in order to join the larger demonstration against the education bill.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: With five student demonstrations scheduled for today, there is no sign that students and faculty are prepared to accept the law as a fait accompli. The Karamanlis government, however, appears equally determined to hold out. There is still no indication that the protests are significantly affecting New Democracy's electoral prospects. Many Greeks recognize that educational reform is essential, and are fed up with demonstrations that restrict access to the city center two days a week. But if demonstrations remain violent (or escalate), Karamanlis may well feel the electoral impact.

COUNTRYMAN